



**Veterans' Association
of the
Chicago & North Western
Railway**



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The C&NW 16-Inch Softball Team - 2005

The article below appeared in the May 5, 2005 Des Plaines Times about Joe Umana's induction to the 16-Inch Softball Hall of Fame.

Joe Softball

Lifelong player/manager inducted into 16-inch Hall of Fame



Trophies won by Joe Umana's Chicago & North Western teams surround the player-manager in 1980, including one being presented by Dave Leach, a C&NW Vice-President at the time.

Like fireworks on the Fourth of July, the Chicago Cubs occupying Wrigley Field or good ol' bacon and eggs, Joe Umana and 16-inch softball simply go together.

A resident of Des Plaines, the 69-year-old Umana entering his 54th consecutive season as a player/manager in the sport, beginning as a teenager growing up on Chicago's North Side and still going at Majewski Park in Mount Prospect – with numerous stops in between.

In January, Umana was recognized for his life-long dedication to the game with induction into the Chicago 16-Inch Hall of Fame, in the Organizer category.

"It's a great honor," said Umana, whose teams have won 48 championships in various leagues through the decades, "I've been working hard all my life organizing softball, so I really appreciate it. And my wife (Mary) appreciates it, too. It takes a lot for a woman to be with a guy who plays so much softball.

Umana began playing the fabled, no-gloves game of 16-inch softball as a grade-schooler, "with my cousins and friends in the neighborhood," he said. "We would choose up sides and play in the school playground. I started organizing when I was in seventh grade at our Lady of Lords (grammar school). I was the captain and a priest was the coach. I liked organizing and getting the guys together."

And he hasn't stopped since. In 1953 - during his high-school days at Lane Tech, where he played baseball - Umana formed a 16-inch team to play in a Chicago Park District 18-and-Under intermediate league, leading it to a second-place finish. Two years later, and now playing in men's leagues, Umana's clubs won championships in Welles Park and Clarendon Park.

Playing mostly with friends, including several from his childhood, Umana (a left fielder and, "a good place-hitter," he said) added another league title to his growing legacy in 1957 (Clarendon Park A League), won two crowns in 1958 (Clarendon A and Chase Park), one in 1963 (Clarendon A) and another in '65 (Clarendon Park B).

Working for the former Chicago and North Western Railway (where he held a data communications position for 40 years), Umana became player/manager of the company's 16-inch team in 1964, "and we started blooming," he said. The squad won four Clarendon Park Industrial League titles (1965, '67, '68 and '69), also earning Grant Park city-wide industrial tourney championships in 1969 and '70.

"I played against Joe in the '60s," said 72-year-old Park Ridge resident Tony Reibel, a co-founder of the 16-inch Hall of Fame (becoming an original inductee in 1996, in the Player/Manager category) and the man who nominated Umana for inclusion.

"For him, like many of us, the game of softball was a way of life. We didn't have TV or a lot of money, so everything hinged around the playgrounds and playing the game. For 25 years I played 125 to 150 games a year, same as Joe Umana. So I thought Joe was deserving. He loves the game, and his teams were good teams. A manager doesn't have to be the best player in the world – he has to be a good leader. He has to know talent, be fair and want to run with the team. All the managers (in the Hall) dedicated themselves for years to getting the players – the good players – to have a good team playing in the good leagues, and to be fair to the sponsors and represent them well. And those are the things Joe did, as he still proves today."

Umana's C&NW teams also won industrial crowns at Chase Park ('73, '75 and '76), Homer Park C74, '79 and '80), Hamlin Park ('77 and '78), Welles Park ('83-85) - and captured a city-wide industrial title in 1990. Industrial championships were also earned in the Athletic Field League ('91 and '92) during Umana's last two seasons playing strictly in Chicago leagues.

Jim Hallgren, a 58-year-old Park Ridge resident, worked with Umana at the C&NW Railway and played on his softball team, among others. Hallgren retired from the game in 1991.

"Joe lived and breathed softball," Hallgren said. "At work, we'd get a break in the morning and one in the afternoon, and all we'd do is talk softball every day during both breaks. And Joe would remember every detail of the games and the situations. If Joe saw we had something going wrong, he'd have us work on it 'till it went away. He's just a complete softball nut, and I mean that in a good way. I think he deserves being in the Hall of Fame as much or more than anyone else, in any sport."

Meanwhile, Umana's other teams continued to win Chicago Park District league crowns - in the California Park League ('71), Hamlin Park ('72, '77 and '78), Chase Park ('73 and '75), Homer Park ('74), Sauganash Park ('82 through '87) and Eugene Park ('87 and '88).

"A lot of the guys from my grammar school stayed together on teams for 15, 16 years" Umana said. "I made the phone calls and kept them playing. We were playing three, four times a week in the summer. You worked, and then you played softball. And the families came with us. The wives ail knew each other, so it was a night out for the ladies. After the game, we'd go out to a tavern and drink Coke... well, I drank Coke. I never liked beer. But we had fun and talked about the game. You'd get sponsors and go to the taverns. And the sponsors didn't care if we had the name on the uniform, just so we came to the tavern after the game."

One of Umana's first sponsors was S & N Jewelers, beginning in 1957. Bill Haig, 67, fondly recalled his playing days with Umana on those S & N teams — and other ball clubs as well.

"I've known Joe since age 10. We started playing together in grammar school," said Haig, a Rogers Park resident who played with Umana until 1966. "He's a wonderful guy; he was always the leader organizing the teams, even in grammar school. He did everything you could imagine — getting the uniforms and the practice games, going to organizational meetings, making out all the schedules. He was highly respected by everybody. He was also a steady left fielder, and a singles-type hitter with good speed on the base paths. As a manager he was always a calming influence — not a screamer or a shouter.

"Without people like Joe, you don't have organized softball. He was the one who did all the dirty work, and he's never missed a year playing or managing. That alone puts a guy in the Hall of Fame. But he always won, too. We were fortunate enough to have good players amongst us to hold our own."

Good players alone don't win titles, but good players working together often do. As his record attests, that theory sure worked for Umana.

"It was important to me that we knew each other and liked each other and got along," he said. "I know talent, but you have to know who you're picking, and you have to trust them. I always knew what would work and wouldn't work, and our teams were always more defense and fast running, singles-hitting teams. And I can't stand losing — it makes me feel bad and awful. Some say it's OK as long as you're having fun, but to mine it's no fun losing. And I'm a real worry-bird — I would always worry if we were going to win or not."

Moving to the suburbs, Umana led teams to titles in Majewski's C League ('95 and '96) and Fall League ('97). These days, with his feet bothering him, Umana (who began pitching full-time at age 45), "can't run too much anymore," he said. "But as long as I can swing the bat and pitch, I'll play. I don't play as much as I used to, but I'm still managing."

Through the years, he's also managed to get family members involved, which also helps to keep him going. "My son (Joe, Jr., age 45) — who has helped me manage — is still playing with us," Umana said. "Now, my grandsons Michael (20), Joey (19) and Philip (17) are starting to play. And if my grandkids want to keep playing, I'd still like to keep playing — or managing, anyway. I still love the game, and as you get older you appreciate it more. The game has changed some — the bases are longer and it's more of a power game today — but nothing's changed as far as being around others who share your love for the game. Some people think 16-inch softball isn't that good of a game but I sure do."

Epilog

1992 was the last year the North Western team played in a formal industrial league. But, there was one more game. **Jim Hallgren** tells us about it: “We all got back together in 1995 for one last game. Bobby Madsen arranged for it at Grant Park against a team from Braun Bottle Corp. Many will remember Braun had a facility on Canal St. to the north of our 165 N. Canal St. building. We arrived at Grant Park and after looking over the Braun team doing some pre-game practicing, I remember being pretty upset with Bobby. The Braun team members were all young and they looked to be very good. We, on the other hand, were a bunch of old guys who hadn’t played together in 3 years!

I don’t remember the score but we wound up beating them by at least 10 runs. It was a very fitting end to our Industrial Softball careers - that is, until the Hall of Fame honored us.”

And, what of Joe Umana? Joe is now in his middle ‘70’s and is still managing and occasionally pitching for his son’s team in the Mt. Prospect Men’s League. Joe never stopped playing and managing after his C&NW career.

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